

Historic, archived document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

932
H2Aq 8

BETTER HOMES FOR SOUTHERN FARMERS

ACE 105

A paper to be presented by A. C. Hudson, Farm Structures Research Division, U. S. Bureau of Agricultural Chemistry & Engineering at the annual meeting of the American Society of Agricultural Engineers, Knoxville, Tennessee, June 27, 1941 ★

LIBRARY
RECEIVED
U. S. Department of Agriculture

Nowhere has the impact of new and swiftly changing social and technical forces been greater than on the American farm. Nowhere has the way of living met such change in recent years. In many cases methods and customs of generations have changed almost overnight. Jobs once impossible are today considered simple. Communities once isolated are now neighbors. Opportunities once unknown now are readily available. Likewise, problems once non-existent are today a reality and a challenge.

First among the factors which have contributed to this change in the way of farm living has been technical and engineering progress, the development of machines that can do jobs quicker than man and do them better and cheaper. Improved farm machinery and power equipment, rural electrification, the modern automobile, telephone, radio—all these and other factors have affected powerfully the way of rural life and the attitude toward rural life. Most important, they are changing the wants and needs of American farm families surely and drastically with respect to their housing.

Today there is a growing awareness of the inadequacy of rural housing and the necessity of doing something about it. Only in recent years has any attempt been made to study the problem. State and federal agencies have been organized to carry on this work, and though results have not been far reaching they are encouraging. There is no one we can blame for this inadequacy, because up until now there has been no particular group responsible. Farm housing has been essentially an individual enterprise. Every man built according to his own notions. It is now evident that this arrangement is no longer satisfactory and that the various agencies and individuals concerned

with farm housing must take the responsibility and must make every effort to raise the standards to a level in keeping with our present way of life in America.

There are many problems involved in providing adequate rural housing, as many that are economic and social are technical. A farmer cannot build a new house or remodel an old one if he does not have the money. Neither will he build or remodel unless he is convinced that by so doing he will obtain worthwhile returns and improve living for himself and family. Yet even if he has the desire for better housing and the money necessary to obtain it, he still needs the advice and assistance of architects and engineers, the technically trained men responsible for the finished product. They determine how well the house satisfies the conditions it was intended to meet. If there is to be a better standard for farm living they will be responsible for providing the proper arrangement of the facilities.

The farm home is a basic member of our national structure. It houses the basic family of our society. It is the basic unit of our architecture. America's first houses were farmhouses and for generations they have been an expression of the life and culture of the people who lived in them. From the "salt box" of early New England and the colonial mansion of the Mississippi plantation to the ranch house of California and even the typical one-room mountain cabin of Tennessee, rural architecture has typified and been an integral part of the culture and environment of the people. Each type was developed to meet certain definite needs and was successful in proportion to how well it met those needs. If we are to accept the challenge of today's needs and keep our farmhouses abreast of the times, we must develop a new and vital rural architecture.

Because of misunderstanding as to the fundamental principles of architecture, many people do not consider it a necessary factor in farm housing. They think of architecture not as the fundamental art and philosophy of building and as a reflection of the needs of the people but in terms of sky scrapers, banks, churches, schools, public halls and fine residences. They think of farmhouses as just plain houses where plain people live. That these plain houses are usually unattractive and uncomfortable is accepted as a matter of course. It is seldom realized that the principles of good architecture are just as applicable to the farmhouse as they are to the office building. It is not only possible, but most important, that these principles be applied in developing more satisfactory farmhouses and in raising the standards of rural living. It is only by their effective coordination with other factors that vital and fundamental results will be obtained.

Without undertaking any general discussion of architecture, it is desirable to mention briefly a few of the basic principles of good design that find application in the planning of better farmhouses. These are not new ideas and there are a number of sources where a more comprehensive treatment is given. They are mentioned here primarily for the purpose of emphasis and the possibility that they might suggest new applications.

First, the house must be functional. It must work. Not only must it be soundly and durably constructed to provide necessary protection and comfort, but it must serve efficiently the purpose for which it was intended. This requires that the plan be logically organized, that it provide a functional relation between rooms arranged to suit present-day modes of living and that it facilitate efficient housekeeping.

The plan of the house dictates primarily the exterior treatment, for the elevation is simply the external expression of internal function. Attempts to make the plan fit some preconceived idea of exterior design are likely to fail.

Second, the house must also be economical. Unnecessary features must be eliminated, space must be arranged for maximum utility, even multi-purpose rooms used where possible. Maintenance and operating costs must be kept to a minimum. Construction must be simple and materials used efficiently and honestly, relying on their texture and color, together with skillful arrangement of masses and openings to produce a pleasing architectural effect.

Third, the house must meet the conditions of its environment. Climatic influences must be recognized and expressed in the design. The site must be considered with regard to topography, orientation and surrounding buildings. Native materials should be used to an advantage wherever possible, contributing not only to a more economical building but to one more in keeping with the locality.

Just as basic as the functional requirements are the esthetic qualities which the house must possess. No dwelling can make a satisfactory home if it provides merely for the mechanics of living. In any house, no matter how small, there must be a sense of comfort in its character and detail, a feeling of charm in its appearance and setting. Standards of design must therefore be equally considered along with standards of construction. While it may be necessary to reduce this basic house to the simplest of shapes, even to a box, it must nevertheless be a well-proportioned box with its mass and materials and openings treated with skill and imagination even at some slight increase in cost.

There can be no quarrel with these principles, nor can there be any question regarding the possibility of applying them to farmhouses. Yet to even the casual observer, it must be apparent how seldom these principles have been satisfactorily applied. It is not difficult to understand why this is so when one considers the lack of qualified designers. Because farmhouses are usually built at low cost, they have not been profitable to professional architects, nor have they as a rule attracted even the more highly skilled builders and contractors. Since adequate plan services offered by various State colleges and the U. S. Department of Agriculture have been available for only a few years, it is obvious that for many years in which economic and technical changes have created new problems in housing that the farmhouse has not had the attention of trained men.

Furthermore, it is plain that it will be necessary for these same public agencies to carry the burden of this responsibility since no increased activity in this field is immediately anticipated from private enterprise. It will be necessary for the research, extension and other interested agencies of our Federal and state governments to cooperate and to coordinate their efforts in this work.

Although many of the problems call for trained technical service, it is highly important to raise the rural family's conception of adequate housing to convincing them of the advantages of new and better ideas, improved methods, new materials or new uses of old materials. The inertia of old ideas and old ways is difficult to overcome.

In connection with the Farm Housing Research Project being conducted at Athens, Georgia, the opportunity has come to offer within a very limited range architectural services to farm families planning to build or remodel. These services include preliminary sketches, the preparation of working

6/7

drawings and specifications and supervision of some of the actual construction. This assistance, for which there is no charge, is extended in return for test data, research and demonstration privileges which are afforded by the house. Working with these people in developing acceptable plans, it is surprising to find their indifference and even resistance to efforts made to provide them with a satisfactory design developed to meet their own particular requirements. They have seen poorly designed and cheaply constructed houses so often that they have become used to them and have little appreciation for anything better because it is unfamiliar.

One factor in gaining acceptance for other designs in this region is the country builder and small contractor who, even more than the individual farmer, constructs most of the farmhouses usually without the benefit of an acceptable plan. An even more important factor is the home magazines, the real estate sections of newspapers and the plan booklets distributed by various materials and equipment manufacturers, all of which contain a variety of house plans usually presented in a very attractive manner which tends to hide some of their undesirable features. That most of these houses are of the urban type, designed for city lots, services and living conditions does not seem to occur to the farmer who wants to build his house just like one of them. Neither does it occur to him that they are far above the cost range of the average farmhouse and that they often require mechanical equipment beyond the limit of farm income. Often when a family intends to build, they will clip from a newspaper a plan and a photograph, frequently not of the same house, and attempt to force them into an arrangement which will satisfy the family ambition and at the same time meet the family budget. Many times their eyes are caught by some external feature or trick of construction which may have no relation to the plan and involve an added

expense. The plan may even omit certain facilities necessary in farmhouse operation. Yet they are reluctant to accept a simple straight-forward design because it does not offer the novelty and variety to which they have become accustomed.

Plainly there is a great need for educating farm people to a better appreciation of good design and a higher standard of housing, as well as providing them with the services which will make these higher standards available. Most farm people realize that they need better facilities, but they should have guidance as to the best way to meet these needs. They need to see good houses to appreciate them. They need to see how attractive, comfortable and economical a farmhouse can be made with the benefit of intelligent and skillful planning. They need to recognize the value of good design and understand why it is good. They need to realize the opportunities for better living made possible by better houses, the opportunities for better farms, better communities and a better and more stable rural society.

How to meet these needs effectively is a challenge to all of us who are concerned with improving ways of rural living. How well these needs are met will depend in large measure upon how willingly we accept this challenge and how well we do our job.

